STATUS SEEKING REEXAMINED
Mark 10:35-45
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I have the greatest admiration for people who come to church on this Sunday. With the exception of Christmas and Easter Sunday you can never be altogether sure what the minister will be talking about. Except for this Sunday. Throughout the land preachers are preaching today about money. Most of the people who come to hear them preach know what the topic will be. They come anyway and I admire them/you greatly for it.

What I have to say about the subject is one small vignette. It has nothing to do with the sermon which will follow. But I heard it this summer, have been saving it ever since and here it comes. It is about the famous trail lawyer, Clarence Darrow. He had successfully defended one of his clients in what seemed to be an open and shut case - against the man. Months later at a cocktail party, a very wealthy woman hurried up to him, introduced herself as the man's sister, and gushed, "Mr. Darrow, how can I ever thank you for what you have done for my brother?" "Madame," he replied, "ever since the Phoenicians invented money there has been a most appropriate way to say 'thank you'."

Stewardship, the topic which will occupy so much homiletical attention this morning, is about money. It is about budgets and inflation and keeping the church in business another year. At this level it is fairly simple. But the real issue in the matter of Stewardship is not simple at all. It is not merely a matter of a ten percent increase to cover the spiraling cost of operating. That's bookkeeping. You know whether you can or will do it, and it should be fairly clear by now what happens if you do or don't.

The real issue is more complicated than that. We came at it last Sunday by way of a story in Mark's Gospel which precedes our text this morning. In that story a man asked Jesus what he should do to inherit eternal life. Jesus didn't say, "raise your pledge ten percent". He said, "sell all you have, give it all away and come, follow me." I suggested that there is unresolved tension in that story: that it bothered the disciples as much as it bothers us. I suggested, and I believe, that the point was that we cannot experience God's love for us and the joy of our salvation if we are depending on something else for that same experience. I believe our Lord was inviting us to loosen our grip on things, to avoid being possessed by our possessions. I do not think that is easy. In Hugh T. Kerr's vivid metaphor, "I do not believe the summons to Christian discipleship is an invitation to a tea party." In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's unforgetable idiom, I believe the preacher who takes the cutting edge off the demand of Jesus Christ is doing you no service, but rather peddling what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace". I do not believe it is possible to be a Christian without a conversion of the most fundamental type. I do not believe it must be an emotional upheaval. I do not believe it happens all at once. But I am certain that being a Christian means being changed: values, attitudes, behavior - and that is neither easy, nor simple.

The real issue in Stewardship is discipleship, not simply money: discipleship in terms of answering the call of Jesus Christ to follow Him, to live for Him, to stand and fight for the values He proposed; essentially, to become new people for Him.

In the text I cited earlier, and discussed last week, the rich man's riches were preventing him from doing that - and the very next incident in Mark's Gospel

our text today, is a variation on the same theme. This time the issue is not wealth but power, influence, status - if you will; the ambition of two of His followers to be better than the others.

But, first let's look at the topic in contemporary terms. It was in 1959, the era of the gray flannel suit,.. that Vance Packard wrote a book which made us aware of the importance of status seeking in our culture. The Status Seekers was widely read for its intriguing analysis of the symbols of status and how totally people were willing to give themselves to their pursuit.

Democracy, after all, was supposed to have ended all that. Aristocracy, inherited titles, rigid class lines were long dead. Packard suggested that all democracy did was change the symbols and make them widely available. Americans were, he suggested, unapologetically seeking the symbols of prestige, influence and rank. A friendly British critic at the time described the new American as a "person borrowing money he can barely pay back to buy something he doesn't really want to impress someone he can hardly stand."

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Sociologists point out the same phenomenon occurs in Communist countries. Marxism, of course, has no provision at all for rank and privilege. The official ideal - the goal - is a classless society. A Harvard study, however, concluded that Marxism has simply stimulated people to be a little more innovative about status seeking: that there are in fact, no fewer than ten identifiable class ranks in Russian Society. Packard identified the symbols of status in America in familiar terms: home, address, occupation, friends, clubs, religion and politics, and, of course, having one's own key to the Executive Washroom.

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There are variations on the theme. More modest professions must devise different symbols if the honorable search for status is to continue. College professors don't join the jet set. In the academic world it has to do with books written, journal articles published and consulting jobs. In some professions, such as the ministry - which everyone assumes has something to do with both poverty and humility - the search becomes poistively tortuous: size of membership, budgets are effective, but too blatant to parade. More important are things like school, professors I know, books I have read. For Presbyterians, time spent in Scotland, I have discovered, is a very good number. Sometimes we are so creative in our search that we turn it upside down and enjoy the status which results from jobs we have turned down or churches from which we have been invited to leave.

Perhaps it is a product of our affluence, but in the secular world there is a dynamic operating currently in the area of status seeking which I find intriguing. As is usually the case, Madison Avenue discovered it first. It is best seen in the Volkswagen television commercial. Reggie Jackson, New York Yankees baseball star, millionaire, collector of Rolls Royces - is driving a V.W. "Why, Reggie," a voice asks. The answer is a very knowing "Because I'm Reggie Jackson and I don't have to impress anybody, that's why." That is to say, you really have it if you don't need to surround yourselves with its symbols.

When he wrote the book in 1959, Vance Packard observed that "Many people are badly distressed and scarred, by the anxieties and inferiority feelings generated by this unending process of rating and status striving. The status seekers are people who are continually straining to surround themselves with visible evidence of the superior rank they are claiming." (p.5).

Ten years later Presbyterian George Peters wrote, "...there is something tragically pathetic about our poor attempts to wring some meaning out of life. For all this emphasis upon status and the symbols of status is nothing more than a vain attempt to make ourselves feel important, necessary, superior." (Farewell to Status, The Protestant Hour).

That is the cue, by the way, for the preacher to tell you that status seeking is wrong, wrong, wrong! That we are all equal in God's eyes, that we must try to be humble, that it is sinful to want to be great. And it is precisely at this point, when the preacher starts talking like that, that most people - I am convinced - stop listening. Most people know better than that. There is, apparently, something honestly human about wanting to be great. People in the pew know that religion is irrelevant which denies humanity. Good theology teaches that sin is not simply being human, but abusing, overdoing or underdoing something that belongs to our essential humanity. Psychiatrist Rollo May defines the demonic as a normal human function gone haywire. There is nothing wrong with sexuality - sin happens when it is misused. There is nothing wrong with aggressiveness - sin happens when it causes people to buy guns and hurt one another. And I am going to suggest, there is nothing wrong with wanting to excel - to be great - sin happens when we fasten on to the wrong definition and the wrong symbols.

I think that's what the text is about this morning. Jesus and His disciples were on the way to Jerusalem. The pace of His ministry had quickened. The things Mark has Him saying on the road to the city are hard, uncompromising, harsh. Tension is mounting. The disciples, sensing that some crisis is imminent, are afraid. And in the midst of all that, with exquisitely bad timing, James and John say, "Grant us to sit at your right hand and left hand when you come into your glory." At the time they thought He was literally going to occupy the ancient throne of David. They thought they were on their way to a revolution which would end with Jesus of Nazareth acclaimed as Messiah and King. James and John, with Peter, part of the inner circle of disciples, simply wanted to be close to the action. They wanted to be Secretary of State and Attorney General. It was a request for status.

Jesus asked if they could pay the price. They said "yes", foolishly. They could not. When the arrest and flogging and spitting started they backed away as quickly as the rest. But then Jesus, as He had done so often, used the situation to teach them something. It is a consistent theme in all His teaching..."those who are supposed to rule the gentiles Lord it over them...but not so with you... whoever would be great among you must be your servant."

He did not, please notice, suggest that it was wrong to want to be great. He did not suggest that Christians are immune to ambition. In fact, what He seems clearly to be doing is redefining greatness. "It isn't what you think," He was saying. "It is not power and authority. The whole world thinks it is, but the world is wrong. Greatness is a product of service."

Think how frequently something like that theme emerges in His teaching.

In order to enjoy yourself you must learn to give away -
In order to experience love, it must be risked -
In order to live, you must be prepared to die -
In order to receive, you must give -
In order to be yourself, you must be for others -
In order to be great, you must serve.

Nowhere in that is there a condemnation of the basic human need to live and the persistent desire for full life, joy, satisfaction, status. Rather, it is the way to find what we are looking for.

It is the Christian secret. Happiness is the product of forgetting about your own and concentrating on someone else's. Joy is a product of helping someone rejoice. Contentment is seeing those you love feel content. Greatness is serving others.

How nice that in 1979 the Christian secret is enjoying a bit of public notoriety. A Yugoslavian Nun - Mother Teresa of Calcutta - has received the Nobel Peace Prize. You know the name by now, I am sure. Her story was told beautifully in a 1976 book by Malcolm Muggeridge who was doing a documentary on her work for the BBC. The title of the book is "Something Beautiful for God".

Mother Teresa founded the Missionaries of Charity to care for the poorest of the poor on the streets of Calcutta. She began by gathering five deserted urchins, feeding, clothing and teaching them the alphabet. The Order has grown. Today there are 158 branches, 1800 nuns, 120,000 lay co-workers, 53,000 lepers are cared for in Medical Centers in Asia and Africa.

Her greatness - and Muggeridge saw it immediately - was that she didn't care at all about the world's definition of greatness, and yet she was an achiever, organizer, great administrator. She simply defined greatness as service. Listen to her describe her work with those who are dying - and who the Missionaries of Charity pick up off the streets and carry to a hospice: "We want to make them feel that they are wanted. We want them to know that there are people who really want them, who really want them at least for a few hours that they have to live...They are brought to die within the sight of a loving face."

Muggeridge asked her to be analytical about her work. She said, "The biggest disease today is not leprosy or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for and deserted by everybody. For all kind of diseases there are medicines and cures. But for being unwanted, except there are willing hands to serve and there's a loving heart to love, this terrible disease can never be cured." (p.99). That, Jesus taught, is greatness. That is prestige, status; if you wish to be great, serve.

I flinch, frankly, when someone calls this, or any church, great. I know what they mean. I agree. But the only greatness that really matters is that generated by our service. All the rest is simply the means to that end; service to one another: service to the needs in our own number: service to the neighbors who look to us because there is nowhere else to look: service to the whole world. That is why we exist. That is the only greatness we dare discuss.In Jesus Christ God has called us to be changed, to become new and different. He wants us to refocus, to convert our fundamental values. The promise is wholeness, happiness, salvation. You don't need a preacher to tell you that no other way works: that the pursuit of power and prestige, as an end in itself becomes demonic, and cannot ever succeed. In Jesus Christ God has shown us another alternative, the way of the servant. In Jesus Christ God himself came among us in the form of a servant. That is the awesome claim of the incarnation.

And that, it seems to me, is the issue on Stewardship Sunday. Not just ecclesiastical bookkeeping, but discipleship - salvation - and God's new brand of greatness.

Amen.